Lived Experience:

A Conversation with Keg de Souza

by Beth Williamson

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Keg de Souza's multidisciplinary practice gravitates around issues of place, community, and spatial politics. Drawing on her architectural training and experience as a squatter and organizer, she uses installation, temporary architecture, performance, workshops, and food to create informal, imaginative platforms for learning, participation, and exchange. Her recent projects include *Changing Courses* (2017), devoted to displaced food cultures in Australia; *The only rock we eat* (2018–ongoing), a meal in which salt suggests how we might think about the future of food production and consumption; the "Temporary Spaces, Edible Places" series, which uses food to initiate dialogues about place; *Nganga toornung-nge dharraga Bunjil Bunjil* (*Looking down from the wings of Bunjil*) (2021), an interactive sculpture and grasslands

ZAN WIMBERLEY, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Installation view of "Common Knowledge and Learning Curves," Artspace, Sydney, 2018.

learning garden; and *Not a Drop to Drink* (2021), focused on conversations around water scarcity.

"Shipping Roots," de Souza's current exhibition at Climate House (formerly Inverleith House) at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), traces three hidden plant histories and their legacies. Immersive spaces for each story, as well as a children's room, a reading room, and a research room, bring together objects, images, processes, people, and locations to offer a playful, multisensory experience, sharing a wealth of insights while raising questions not only about the colonial pasts of these plants, but also the lessons they might hold for the present and the future.

Beth Williamson: You are of Goan heritage, and you live on unceded Gadigal land in Australia. What does that mean for your work?

Keg de Souza: A lot of my practice looks at what it means to live on that land. Gadigal land is the First Nations land around Sydney. I try to unpack what it means to be living there as a settler while also looking at my personal history, the colonization of my

THIS PAGE:
Installation view of "Shipping Roots," with ***Green Hell***, 2023.

OPPOSITE:
Keg de Souza

THIS PAGE: RUTH CLARK / OPPOSITE: NEIL HANNA

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ancestral land, and the kinds of issues that brings up. Much of my work is an exploration of place—and what that means. I am always interested in investigating place through different lenses.

BW: Your architectural background seems to play into your approach to social and spatial environments and ideas of place. How do you see it as informing your practice?
KdS: When I trained as an architect, I was taught almost solely by white men. I know this happens in a lot of professions, but, as a woman of color, I did not have representation through that training. I lived in Perth, on Noongar land on the west coast of Australia, and there was no acknowledgement of the land we were designing for. I'm hoping things have changed since I went to architecture school in the late 1990s.

BW: What is your experience of occupying spaces in different ways, and how does that affect what you do?
KdS: The key moment came after I finished studying architecture, when I moved to Sydney and lived in a squatting situation. That moved me away from formal architecture to thinking about social space. It was a very public squat. It was the eve of the Sydney Olympics in 2000, and we used the international media attention to our favor—we highlighted the high cost of housing and how many spaces were empty because people were speculating on the land. Drawing attention to these housing issues was really important, and it brought us together as a group. We squatted four council-owned, locked-up shop fronts on a main street in Sydney. Working in a community and thinking about the social side of space shifted my thinking about space and spatiality; it became less about built walls and more about temporary communities.

BW: Your projects often focus on pedagogy to bring marginalized voices to the fore. What is the importance of that emphasis in your work, and of conversation and exchange?
KdS: My personal lived experience has really shaped how I create projects. In Perth, I was the only kid of color in my class. I often knew the answers, but I was too scared to speak out or draw attention to myself. That has affected how I think about teaching and learning. I try to create more accessible ways of sharing

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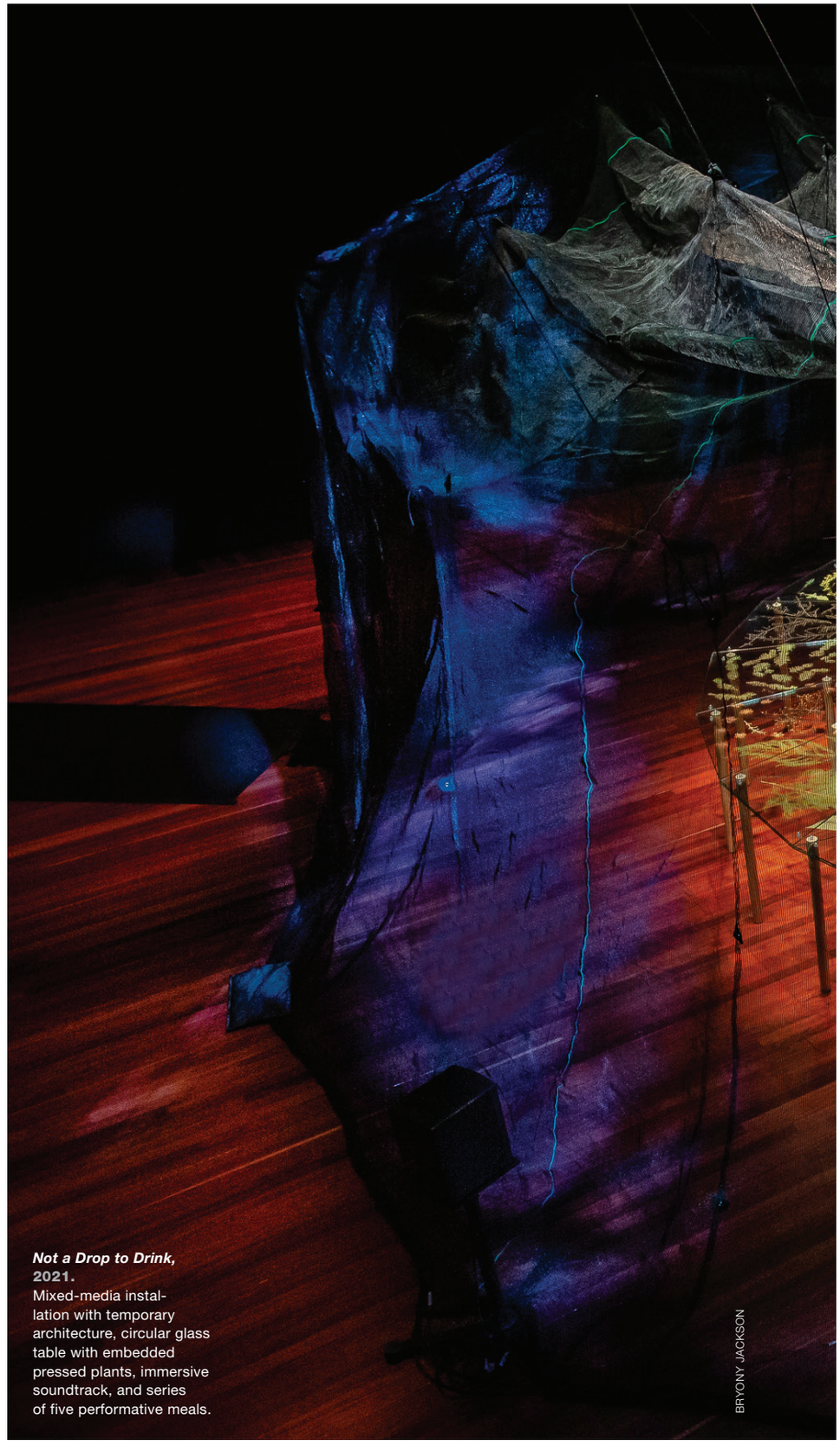
knowledge, which comes through in an exploration of place. How can we learn about place in a more equitable way? A lot of the works that I create and the events that I do in my "temporary architectures," as I call them, are experiments in the true sense. Creating these projects within a contemporary art context gives me an amazing ability to make quite radical pedagogical environments that couldn't be done in a classroom.

BW: At Climate House, you've built a space specifically for children, which is unusual. Often the artist makes the work, and then the education department adds something for children. Why do you place such spaces at the heart of what you do?
KdS: I like having different access points into the work. Much of this new work was developed in conversation and collaboration with curator Emma Nicolson. We worked together at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney, in the education department. I was an educator, and she was my boss. Emma and I share an interest in pedagogy and how it becomes part of the work, so there has been a nice collaborative dialogue.

BW: Shared meals also create a convivial setting for conversation and exchange. Is that one of the reasons why food often features in your work?
KdS: That's definitely a key aspect. Food is often tied to place, so it's a way to start thinking about place through what we eat. Eating food that is specific to a place is a good way to begin the discussion—you start to unpack the ingredients, their histories, and what they mean. The picnic that I did in London (*Temporary Spaces, Edible Places: London*, 2014) looked at the ploughman's platter, which was invented by the cheese board to boost sales. The pickles and chutneys included in it are tied to my South Asian heritage, but they are completely different because they are adapted for an English palate. There are colonial links and histories. So, thinking about the food you are eating opens up those discussions. It helps to bring people together to inspire the conversation, as in *Not a Drop to Drink*, where the menus kick-started discussions about water scarcity.

BW: Could you tease out the double meaning of "Shipping Roots?"



***Not a Drop to Drink*, 2021.**
Mixed-media installation with temporary architecture, circular glass table with embedded pressed plants, immersive soundtrack, and series of five performative meals.

BRYONY JACKSON

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KdS: "Routes" is an obvious play on colonial shipping routes. And "roots" is linked not only to plants, but also to my lived experience.

BW: The current vision for Climate House is to be invested in "how botanical knowledge supports practices of ecological and personal healing." Do you see your work helping to realize that goal?

KdS: I hope so. This is a complex, layered, and inspiring context. The role of institutions like RBGE in the British Empire is clear. A lot of the plants were grown to see what economic benefit they might have, like the stories of eucalyptus and prickly pear within the exhibition. An institution like this has an incredible history of collecting, with specimens taken from all over the world, which opens many windows of inquiry. There is the herbarium, with specimens taken from all over the world. What does it mean to be a holder of plants from other places? With this project, we are also producing a publication to introduce more inquiries into these histories. Looking at First Nations knowledge of the eucalyptus in Australia, we have writers contributing on the importance of Country with a capital "C"—the lands, waters, and skies to which First Nations peoples are connected through ancestral ties—contextualized by scientists at RBGE. It was important for me to look at the different layers of knowledge held here—the rare books, the library, and the herbarium, as well as the scientists doing work here now—and bring those voices into the gallery.

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OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: FELICITY JENKINS

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: ***Changing Courses,* 2017.** Temporary architectural installation and series of events on displaced and changing food culture narratives in Australia, part of "The National: New Australian Art," Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney.

An audio work in the eucalyptus room features a number of interviews I did with the scientists at RBGE, the Deputy Conservator of Forests in Goa, and a 100-year-old Indigenous elder back in Australia. He tells some heart-breaking stories of being pushed off his land and how he was treated growing up; he also tell stories of animals—dreaming stories. I wanted to have the ecological, the scientific, the economic, the personal, and the political all in conversation with each other; I wanted to bring elements of the collection, contemporary voices, and the voices of the plants together, layering as much as possible into the space.

BW: Were you already aware of the colonial nature of the plant archive, or did that emerge through the research?

KdS: A bit of both. I wanted to link the narratives of Australia, where I live; of India, where my ancestors were from; and of the U.K. through plants. There were foresters at the gardens here who trained Indian foresters. That introduced eucalyptus.

BW: What are some of the stories that you share in *Blue Haze*, the installation focused on eucalyptus?

KdS: I had no idea that eucalyptus covers 22 million hectares of land mass around the world. In India, it's the most common timber plantation tree; it's the fastest-growing, tallest hardwood there is. The British took the seeds from Australia early on, propagated them in greenhouses back in the U.K., and then sent them to various colonial outposts. In India, they trialed 170

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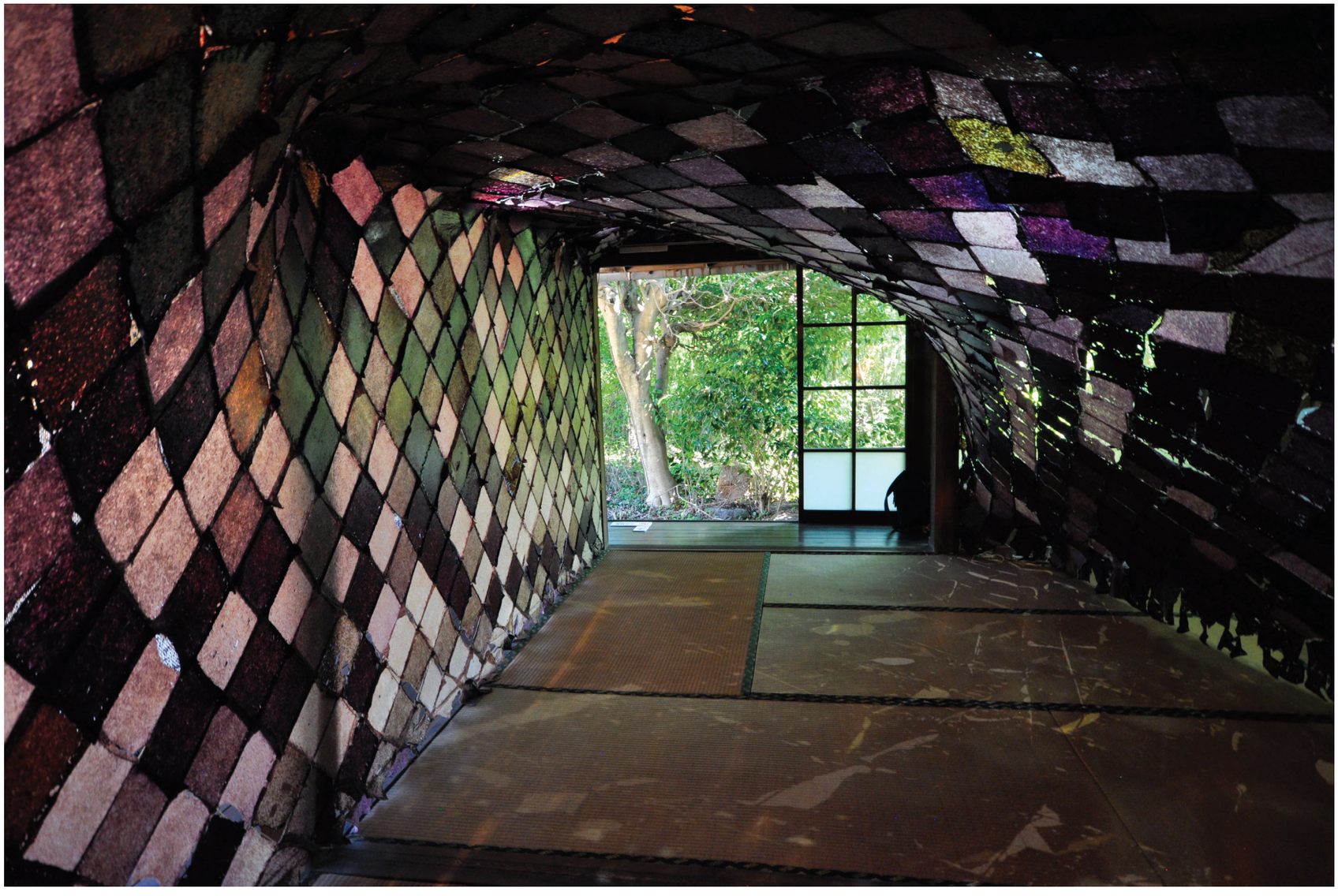

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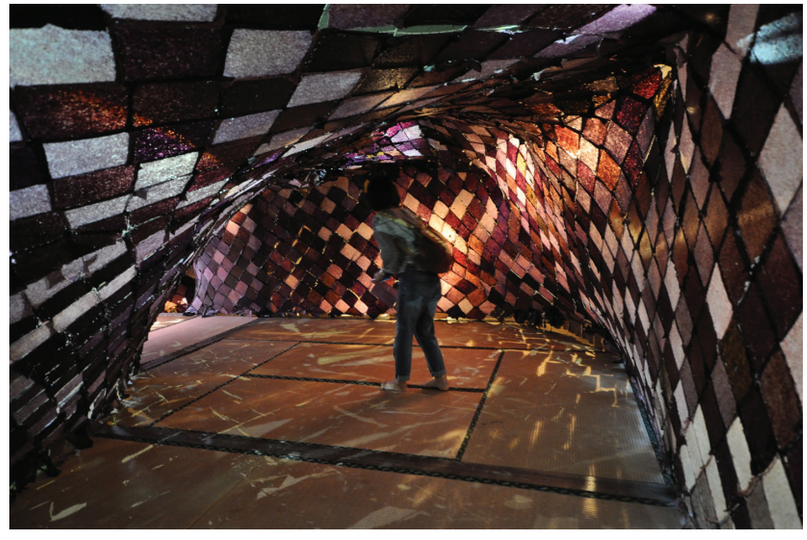
different species in the Nilgiri Hills. There are records here of the different species that they tested in the 1800s. In illustrations from 1857, you can see that eucalyptus is established. There are also huge amounts of eucalyptus in South Africa, even in California. In Australia, one of the questions I ask is: What does it mean to have trees that traditional custodians have managed on the land for tens of thousands of years? They know that the land needs fire and always did controlled burning. Eucalyptus seed pods require really hot temperatures to open, and fire is part of their ecology; but that doesn't work in a place like California, where redwoods and other trees haven't evolved to tolerate fire. The installation is called *Blue Haze* because the oil in eucalyptus leaves mixes with water vapor in the air and reflects light through a short wavelength, which is mostly blue. In Sydney, we have the Blue Mountains, created by this blue haze.

BW: What about *Green Hell*?

KdS: The *Opuntia*, or prickly pear, was brought on the first fleet to Australia because the British wanted to start their own cochineal dye industry to break the Spanish monopoly; the plant serves as a habitat for the cochineal insect. They also used it as an agricultural fence, to divide the land that was stolen, to keep cattle in and people out, but they couldn't control it. It became completely invasive in Australia, covering an area larger than the U.K. within a few decades. It became known as the "green hell."

They tried a bird cull, shooting every magpie, crow, or emu in sight. They tried singeing it and hacking it down with sickles. There were rewards offered and patents submitted for mulchers, all in an effort to control it. People abandoned farms. *Green Hell* includes archival photos showing prickly pear as far as you can see. It's still in the psyche, and it's still illegal to sell or propagate prickly pear in New South Wales and Queensland. They finally brought it under control in 1925 with the introduction of the cactus moth from Argentina; there is a monument to the Cactoblastis moth in Queensland.

BW: *Fleece Fugitives* is about "wool shoddy aliens," or seeds accidentally transported around the British Empire in sheep fleeces. Can you explain its local connection?



OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: ***Abundance: Fruit of the Sea, Bounty of the Mountain,* 2016.** 2 views of project developed in the fishing village of Kou on Teshima Island, Japan, for the Setouchi Triennale.

KdS: A botanist told me about these seeds. There was a surge in demand for tartan, and so they imported fleece for more wool; the fleece carried seed hitchhikers, which made their way to wool mills in Scotland. There are hundreds of specimens of Australian plants in the RBGE herbarium that were collected locally. Some of them were very familiar to me, and I became interested in how many Australian plants managed to propagate here. One local collector, Ida Hayward, who was active around 1912, walked around wool mills searching for these plants. The exhibition reading room includes her book *The Adventive Flora of Tweedside* (1919), which documents her findings. This wasn't an intentional introduction, though it was still done at the hands of humans. A few of the plants became quite invasive, including the piri-piri, which is a problem around Lindisfarne and Northumberland in the north-east of England.

BW: "Shipping Roots" is an immersive exhibition, but it is also participatory. Do visitors become agents in their experience as they engage with sound, plants, and play?

KdS: There are different access points through which people can experience the show. Someone might just take away the smell of the plants, and that's great. Someone might stay and listen. The soundtrack is two and a half hours long, so the idea is that you experience a moment; there are also carved stools if people want

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***Temporary Spaces, Edible Places: London,* 2014.**
2 views of project for the Delfina Foundation's Public Domain program, London.

OPPOSITE:
***Nganga toornung-nge dharraga Bunjil (Looking down from the wings of Bunjil),* 2021.**
Powder-coated steel, net, and native grassland plants, installation view.

to listen a bit longer. In addition to the stories, you can hear bio-feedback from the plants. There are parts where I am doing an audio description, which is a way to open access to people who are blind or visually impaired, but it also builds attention for sighted people. We really thought about how to bring this experience to a wider audience. There are elements of chance, and moments when people might find themselves absorbed into a book in the reading room. There are sheepskins in a sunny room; you can have a seat and enjoy a relaxing moment, then decide to learn a bit more—you have the agency to go further. And it's not static; you can walk through billowing silk batik hangings, which move as you pass among them.

BW: How does a botanical lens add to conversations about colonialism, environmental change, and Indigenous rights? What can art and artists bring to that discourse when there are so many voices already at the table—scientists, activists, policymakers?

KdS: I hope that through experiencing this work, people will think about these things—looking at the past, the histories of economic botany, the way things were done. We can learn from past impacts and apply that knowledge to the urgent things happening now. Maybe in the future, prickly pear, which is eaten in Mexico, will be a useful food source. In the research room, there is some prickly pear jam that I made and commercially available jars of tender cactus pads. There are also different brands of eucalyptus oil that I bought recently in India, where native food sources were cleared to make room for eucalyptus. So, we can also think about losing particular foods and species. To think about the future, we have to learn from the past and value Indigenous knowledge, thinking about First Nations custodians being able to manage the land and look after Country.

Keg de Souza's "Shipping Roots" remains on view through August 27, 2023, at Climate House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

THIS PAGE: SHERIEF GABER / OPPOSITE: ANDREW CURTIS, COURTESY THE ARTIST

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contributors

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Ann Landi is the founder and editor of vasari21.com and has been a contributing editor at *ARTnews* for over 20 years. Here, she interviews Jim Condron.

MARIA PORGES

Maria Porges is an artist and writer currently teaching at the California College of the Arts. She reviews Amalia Mesa-Bains's current retrospective at BAMPFA.

BETH WILLIAMSON

Beth Williamson, an art historian and writer with a special interest in modern and contemporary art in Britain, shares a conversation with Keg de Souza and reviews Sonia Boyce's exhibition "Feeling Her Way."

JAN GARDEN CASTRO

New York-based contributing editor Jan Garden Castro (jancastro.com) speaks with Abigail DeVille.

ROBERT PREECE

Robert Preece is a contributing editor based in Rotterdam. This issue, he interviews Oscar Tuazon.

JONATHAN GOODMAN

Jonathan Goodman is a writer in New York. In this issue, he speaks with Hu Xiaoyuan about her practice.

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